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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MISS AMY LOWELL OBJECTS

SIR,—Your May number contained a review of my recent volume of poetry so eloquent in its revelation of a total misunderstanding of the book, and of modern poetry in general, that perhaps a few words of explanation may be accorded a place in your pages. Your reviewer is evidently puzzled, sadly puzzled, as to how to take the book, and he finally ends by leaving it studiously alone while he busies himself with demolishing a bogey of his own creation. The entire paper is devoted to the denial of the existence of a "new art," treated first in regard to rhythm and then as to the use of words.

In the first place, permit me to say that the idea of a "new art" exists solely in the gentleman's imagination. New forms of art, perhaps; new art, no. Art is like a tree, capable of growth, occasionally a leaf or a branch drops, but, for the most part, the young boughs are merely superimposed above the old ones and, all together, make the tree. Each generation has its "new poetry;" and, as the present merges into the past, this "new poetry" fades imperceptibly into the great body of, simply, "poetry."

The main contention of the article, since it does not exist, need detain us no longer. What is more pertinent, however, is the author's analysis of rhythms. It is unfortunate that this, too, is based upon a misnomer. What enthusiastic and ignorant soul first translated the French term, "vers libre" into "free verse," I do not know. Of course, the English term has neither accuracy nor sense. There is no such thing as "free verse" nor ever can be. Poetry, being an art, must move within a form; but the student of many literatures knows that our English metric is by no means the only one proper to poetry. Free verse is a ridiculous misunderstanding of a French word. *Vers* in French means "line," not "verse," the term "vers libre," therefore, means a line which is not obliged to contain a given number of feet. "Free line" would be an accurate, if decidedly clumsy, name for the form; "Cadenced Verse" is better, and I wish that its use might become general. But language is a strange thing, people fasten upon a word and naturalize it, willy-nilly. The poets and the reading public are accustomed to "vers libre," much as they are accustomed to "chauffeur," and to render the latter by "shover" would be to follow the same sound-analogy that has governed the translation of "*vers*," but with more sense in the adaptation.

The critic's reference to the double rhythm of English metre—viz, that of its regular scansion and that of the accented words—is

well known to all students of prosody, but that the effect of such practice is as "subtle" as that possible of attainment by the use of "Cadenced Verse" could easily be proved not to be so had I space for citations, and the object of a scansion to which "we cannot without pain force our utterance to conform" is not very clear.

The fact cannot be sufficiently insisted upon that we moderns write poetry to be spoken and not merely read with the eye, for your reviewer's statement that he finds pleasure in the knowledge that a metrical line will scan even though he cannot read it into the pattern without torturing the natural accents of the words, is simply to say that his vision takes comfort in an ordered arrangement which he believes should be present even though he cannot hear it.

The question is too long to treat adequately here. It has already been gone into at some length in your pages; by Dr. Patterson in "New Verse and New Prose," in *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW* for February, 1918, by me in "A Consideration of Modern Poetry," again in the "North American" for January, 1917, by me also in "The Rhythms of Free Verse" in *The Dial* of January 17th, 1918. The subject is carried still farther in a forthcoming article "Some Musical Analogies in Modern Poetry" to be published in the *Musical Quarterly*.

Your reviewer seems to think that "polyphonic prose" and "vers libre" are the same thing. Needless to say they are quite distinct, as a perusal of the above-mentioned articles will prove to him. But what he means by saying that "words make us think, polyphonic prose will not let us think" I am at a loss to conjecture. I have been blamed for many things, but never for a paucity of ideas in my poems. "Over-intellectualised" is a charge to which I am painfully accustomed, to be accused of writing poetry for the mere beauty of words is a new, and not altogether unpleasurable, sensation. I should take more joy in it, however, did I not know it to be profoundly untrue, and I beg to ask my highly imaginative critic how on earth one can use words "for the sake of their mere connotation." What he means is simply, I take it, that I go too fast for him. I have heard that before, and it is probably true. At any rate, I welcome it as the only direct bit of criticism of the book in question which the paper contains.

Alas! Coleridge wrote *Kubla Khan* and not I. But, in spite of the fact that the "suggestiveness" of his words is "subdued to the formal decorum of ordinary, sane human thought," I fear that that divine and exuberant fragment can scarcely make a larger claim on those qualities, in its entirety, than can my plainer, heavier, more simple-thoughted volume *Can Grande*.

Yielding me the palm for sanity is but to say that Coleridge wins the toss for poetry. This indeed your reviewer, emerging from his confusion, must, I feel certain, allow.

AMY LOWELL.

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THE REVIEWER RETORTS

SIR,—In my review of *Can Grande's Castle* I said that certain merits of that composition tempted me to believe that Miss Lowell had "really developed a new and immensely powerful art." This was